

**STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

March 7, 2007

Good afternoon Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) Program administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). My testimony will provide an overview of VR&E program services and performance.

Program Overview

The VR&E program provides veterans with service-connected disabilities the necessary services to assist them in preparing for, finding, and maintaining suitable employment, or achieving maximum independence in their daily living. The VR&E program is an employment-driven program that utilizes education and apprenticeship training in support of a participant's vocational goal. Veterans with disabilities participate in a wide-variety of formal education, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and internships to meet their individual career goals.

Special Programs and Initiatives

VA's VR&E Service has implemented several programs and initiatives to ensure that servicemembers and veterans are informed about the VR&E program and are provided the services necessary to transition from military service to civilian life.

Five Track Employment Process

In 2004, former VA Secretary Anthony J. Principi established a Task Force to study the VR&E Program. As a result of the Task Force recommendations and to advance employment opportunities for veterans with service-connected disabilities, VR&E Service implemented the Five Track Employment Process. The Five Track Process standardizes program orientation practices; integrates veterans, counselors and employment professionals through a comprehensive triage (evaluation) phase; and places the emphasis on employment up front and early on in the rehabilitation process. The Five Track Process empowers veterans with informed choice through one of five employment options:

- **Re-employment** with their previous employer.
- **Rapid Access to Employment** through job-readiness preparation and incidental training opportunities.
- **Self-employment** for the most seriously disabled veterans.
- **Employment Through Long-Term Services** that include formal training and education programs leading to a suitable employment goal.
- **Independent Living Services** that maximize independence in daily living for veterans who are currently unable to work.

In 2005, the VR&E Service stationed 72 Employment Coordinators (ECs) at regional offices across the country. The primary function of the EC is to provide veterans with disabilities any necessary job-readiness skills in addition to job referral/placement services. The ECs also support the Five Track Process.

Additionally, the VR&E Service established Job Resource Labs within each regional office and VetSuccess.gov, an online employment resource. These resources provide vital vocational and employment support to program participants, enabling them to make positive training and employment decisions

leading to successful employment outcomes. The VR&E Service has developed working partnerships and signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with Federal, State, and private-sector employers who have agreed to train and hire veterans participating in the VR&E Program. The VR&E Service has also expanded its relationship with faith-based and community-based organizations for careers in a host of not-for-profit employment areas.

Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)

DTAP is an integral component of transition assistance for servicemembers who may be released because of disability or who believe they have a disability qualifying them for vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits and services. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible servicemembers in making an informed decision about VA's vocational rehabilitation program. It is also intended to facilitate the expeditious delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to eligible persons by assisting them in filing an application for vocational rehabilitation benefits. To ensure that the widest possible military audience receives DTAP briefings, responsibility for providing DTAP presentations is the shared responsibility of members of the Public Contact Team of the Veterans Service Center and members of the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Division at each VA regional office. Recent improvements to the DTAP program include:

- Standardized PowerPoint presentations and a standardized video that provide information on the VR&E program and introduces the Five-Track Process. The DTAP presentation is available online at www.vetsuccess.gov.
- QuickSeries booklet on VR&E benefits and services distributed during DTAP briefings.
- 80,000 DTAP CDs distributed to Military Transition Centers in FY 2006.
- DTAP oversight visits for quality assurance and best practices.

- One-on-one DTAP briefings provided to servicemembers receiving treatment at the Polytrauma SCI Centers.
- An updated MOU signed on September 19, 2006 between VA, DOL, DoD and DHS.

In FY 2006, VA conducted 1,462 DTAP briefings with 28,941 participants. This fiscal year through the end of January 2007, 493 DTAP briefings have been conducted with 9,407 participants.

Coming Home To Work (CHTW) Program

The VR&E Service has expanded its outreach to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) servicemembers and veterans through early intervention and seamless transition initiatives, to include the Coming Home to Work (CHTW) program. CHTW provides valuable civilian job skills, exposure to employment opportunities, and work experience to servicemembers facing medical separation from the military and uncertain futures. Participants work with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to obtain work experience in a Government facility that supports their career goals. In FY 2007 through the end of January:

- 16 servicemembers are participating in active work experience programs with federal agencies while awaiting discharge or return to duty orders.
- 121 servicemembers are receiving early intervention services in preparation for work experience programs, including vocational counseling, testing, and administrative support necessary for successful placement in a work experience program.
- 24 servicemembers have returned to active duty following early intervention services.

- 108 veterans participating in the CHTW program at a military treatment facility were referred to their local Regional Office for continuation of VR&E services.
- Seven veterans have been hired directly by their work experience employers upon discharge from active duty.

Priority OIF/OEF Processing

Priority outreach and case management services are provided to OIF/OEF servicemembers and veterans who apply to the VR&E program. Regional offices recently designated specific individual(s) to serve as the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Case Coordinators (VRECC). These case coordinators ensure that servicemembers and veterans receive priority attention through the application, entitlement, and Five-Track Employment Process. The case coordinators also participate in VR&E early intervention and outreach activities, including the Coming Home to Work Program.

Partnership with the Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS)

The VR&E Service and the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) continue to work together to provide employment services through our MOU signed in October of 2005. VETS and VR&E have adopted a team approach to job development and placement activities to improve vocational outcomes for program participants. All veterans entering a program of vocational rehabilitation are informed of the employment assistance available through the VETS Program and are encouraged to register with the State Workforce Agency.

Combining the services of DOL's Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialists and Local Veteran's Employment Representatives (LVER),

who are part of the public workforce investment system and its network of over 3,200 One-Stop Career Centers throughout the country, with VA's VR&E staff maximizes the employment services available to veterans and increases the opportunities for successful placements. Both agencies are committed to working together to improve successful employment outcomes to our nation's veterans. Currently 38 VA Regional Offices have a co-located DVOP Specialist or LVER. There are 71 DVOP Specialists or LVERs at these 38 stations. Having the DVOP Specialist or LVER on-site is a best practice that enhances the efficiency of teamwork between the two agencies.

VR&E Performance

The VR&E Service has significantly improved services to servicemembers and veterans accessing and participating in VR&E programs.

The rehabilitation rate has improved. The rehabilitation rate is the number of veterans with disabilities that achieve their VR&E goals and are declared rehabilitated compared to the number that discontinue or leave the program before achieving these goals. In FY 2006, nearly 73% of program participants achieved rehabilitation. In FY 2007 to date, the rate has risen to over 74%.

We have also seen improvement in the number of days it takes veterans to begin a program of services leading toward suitable employment. This is measured by the days a veteran spends in applicant status. In FY 2006, veterans spent an average of 54 days in applicant status. Currently in FY 2007 the average is 53 days.

In FY 2006, 9,225 veterans achieved their rehabilitation employment goals through the program. The top five occupational categories were:

- Professional, Technical, and Managerial careers (6,732).

- Clerical careers (660).
- Services careers (439).
- Machine trades (349).
- Building trades (226).

VR&E workload is expected to increase due to our expanded outreach efforts to separating servicemembers and veterans and increasing disability claims workload; OIF/OEF, resulting in more seriously injured veterans; and the focus on employment and VR&E's Five Track process. To ensure we provide the level of service expected by the American people, we plan to hire additional staff in FY 2007, increasing our on-board strength by over 100 employees. Additional FTE will reduce the number of cases assigned to counseling staff, resulting in a reduction of the case management workload by approximately 10%. This will also increase the timeliness of services provided to program participants.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or any of the other members of the Subcommittee may have.